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Our Passive, Timid CIA Needs

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THE CLASSIC intelligence failure of Pearl Harbor, when U.S. intercepts of the Japanese attack plans remained untranslated in a low-priority "incoming" basket, sparked the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) after World War I. Because the Japanese attack hinged on complete surprise, an intelligence warning would have made a difference. That knowledge remains the driving force behind the billions devoted to foreign analysis by the CIA and its sister agencies in the Defense and State departments.

Despite the billions spent, the United States has been caught unprepared time and time again because—there is no kinder way to put it—our intelligence has failed. Even if we assume the CIA would be able to detect a nuclear attack on the United States in advance, which I do not, continued failures to anticipate important foreign developments make the conduct of a sound foreign policy increasingly difficult. To ignore our intelligence system's flaws—continuing flaws that stem from an uncertain leadership—is to risk our very security.

To examine the record, the House Intelligence Committee selected six major foreign-policy turning points at random: the 1953 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the 1968 Tet offensive in South Vietnam, the 1973 Middle East war, the 1974 coups in Cyprus and Portugal, and India's 1974 nuclear explosion. Because the House has voted not to release the committee's findings, this article is derived from the public record.)

Intelligence Failures

We knew that Czechoslovakia had dashed the Johnson Administration's hopes for nuclear-arms talks with the Russians; that Tet cost thousands of lives; that the Middle East war resulted in the Arab oil embargo, a high cost to the U.S. in terms of military assistance to Israel, and risked U.S.-Soviet conflict. We knew that the coups in Portugal and Cyprus had raised the possibility of Communist influence in a NATO ally and hurt our relationships with Greece and Turkey. We knew that India's nuclear explosion threatened the spread of nuclear weapons.

We did not know intelligence failures had contributed to each unfortunate situation. But we know it now.

U.S. intelligence agencies, we found, had collected a considerable body of excellent information, often at great cost and risk. But the information was not always made available to those who needed it. Written estimates lacked perspective. A few courageous analysts who sounded alarms were not fully supported by their more cautious superiors. Technical breakdowns prevented valuable information from reaching Washington until after the event had passed. Policy officials in the State Department, the White House, and Pentagon who were emotionally com-

mitted to their particular policies, regardless of facts, hindered analysis. Post mortems of intelligence failures tended to blame mid-level analysts, yet the real problems were caused by the leadership. And the intelligence leadership lacks the stature to withstand political pressures that threaten to corrupt the entire system.

After the 1973 Middle East intelligence failure, the CIA acknowledged that the "machinery" of which the analyst was a part had not always eased an exceedingly difficult task. The two most visible parts of that machinery, or bureaucracy, are current-intelligence publications and national intelligence estimates. Neither runs well.

Our intelligence agencies cannot report timely and accurate information consistently. The initial and most obvious sign shows up in what the current-intelligence publications said at the time of key foreign events. The morning that Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus was overthrown by Greek strong man Dimitrios Ioannidis, the CIA wrote that "General Ioannidis takes moderate line while playing for time in dispute with Makarios."

The intelligence agencies had observed signs of Arab military mobilization for more than a week prior to Oct. 6, 1973, when Egypt and Syria attacked Israel. But current-intelligence reporting provided reassurances that neither Egypt nor Syria would go to war.

In the months prior to the April 1974 coup in Portugal, at least four signs of serious political discontent—including an abortive military coup—surfaced in the press. Yet current-intelligence writings followed the sound and fury, not significance, of each "hard news" development. As the director of State Department intelligence, William Hyland, told our committee, "There was enough information to suggest trouble, but it wasn't really subjected to a detailed analysis and a projection of where the trends might be going."

Too Many Pressures

Current-intelligence publications suffer from lack of depth not because those who write them are unimpressive. Most mid-level analysts who write current intelligence are knowledgeable individuals. But they are victimized by the pressures imposed on able people by the bureaucracy.

There are too many intelligence publications: spot reports, instant summaries, daily reports, morning and afternoon reports for the Secretary of State, Presidential briefs, memoranda, communications-intelligence summaries, national-intelligence dailies, weekly summaries. Analysts have meetings to attend, superiors to please (often by softening bold judgments), "positions" of their office to "co-ordinate" with other offices and agencies, deadlines to meet. There is precious little time left to think and write well.

with hundreds of... CIA complains. During the Cyprus crisis, readers complained about "an excess of cryptic raw reports from NSA which could not be translated by lay readers," as the CIA puts it. The few who can comprehend NSA reports often have no time left to compare them with other intelligence. So intelligence puzzles are left half-assembled.

U.S. intelligence cannot follow trends much better than it follows day-to-day events because of weaknesses in the estimative system. Before Tet, U.S. officials had anticipated attacks in Vietnam's highlands and northernmost provinces, but not simultaneous strikes at nearly every urban center. Our intelligence estimates had—in the CIA's words—so "degraded our image of the enemy" that we were unaware the Communists were capable of such attacks.

The CIA's post mortem of the 1974 Cyprus crisis reports that analytical performance "fell quite short of the mark," particularly because of the "failure in July to estimate the likelihood of a Greek-sponsored coup against Archbishop Makarios."

After the Middle East war in October 1973, the CIA realized there had been no National Intelligence Estimate—report prepared from time to time—on the likelihood of war since May—and that estimate had only addressed the next few weeks. A brilliant analysis prepared by the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, also in May, told then Secretary of State William Rogers that the Arabs might well resort to war by autumn. That "wisdom," as the CIA rightly called it, was forgotten in October.

The latest National Intelligence Estimate prior to Portugal's 1974 coup was prepared in 1964.

The National Intelligence Officer (NIO) system at the top of the analytical hierarchy is weak and is responsible for the poor quality of estimates preceding the Portugal, Cyprus, and Middle East crises. NIOs work under the director of the CIA, in his capacity as head of the entire intelligence community. Their influence varies with the CIA director's influence. If he's powerful, their voice is strong. If he's weak, their influence is too.